

There is a line in our 2nd reading today which I would like to take as my starting point, for it is particularly apt to a number of celebrations we had this past week. It reads: "Try, then, to imitate God, as children of his that he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in your place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God."

"A fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God".

It reminds me of the feast we celebrated on Friday when we honoured the martyrdom of St. Laurence, - a deacon, who had been placed in charge of the Church's material resources, and used them to care for the poor. Together with Pope Sixtus II and 4 other deacons he had been arrested by order of Valerian, the Prefect of Rome, while celebrating Mass in one of the catacombs. These others were interrogated and then beheaded on the same day, August 7, so we celebrated their martyrdom on Tuesday, but on discovering that Laurence was in charge of the Church's resources he was kept alive to show the Prefect where those resources were hidden. Laurence took him and his soldiers to Trastevere, where most of the poor lived in abject poverty. Laurence told the Prefect that here he had the Church's riches. He wasn't believed, so tortured for 2 more days, and on August 10 condemned to dying by being roasted alive on a gridiron. He is famously reported to have asked his torturers to turn him over on the other side, because that first side was done. A fragrant offering for sure!

This week was celebrated as Vocations Awareness-week, so it is not out of place to mention some of the other Saints we celebrated this week, all of whom were religious.

On Wednesday came our own St. Mary of the Cross McKillop, 2nd Patroness of Australia, who dedicated her life to the education of young people, more especially in outback areas, where at that time little education was available, and where she and the congregation of sisters she founded, could be quite a distance from the nearest church, and therefore no daily Mass and Communion. That caring for those who were at some distance from a church also extended to those who were distanced from the Church in some other ways, - through poverty, crime and prostitution, or being orphaned, for example.

On Thursday we had the optional memorial of another nun, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who because of her Jewish origin was gassed by the Nazis in the Auschwitz concentration-camp during WWII.

Born as Edith Stein, she was the youngest of 11 children in an observant Jewish family. Highly intelligent, she was encouraged by her mother to engage in critical thinking, which led her to study philosophy. With that in her background, she came to read the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, which influenced her to seek Baptism in the Catholic Church, which happened in 1922. Under the influence of St. Teresa she wanted to become a Carmelite nun, but as a recent convert she was dissuaded from that step by her spiritual advisors, so instead she became first a teacher on a Catholic High School, and later a lecturer at an Institute of Higher learning. 1933 marked the ascent of Nazi power in Germany, and because of her Jewish descent she was forced to resign this public post.

That left her free to pursue her religious vocation with the Carmelites, and she entered their monastery in Cologne, where she made her Novitiate and was professed. She stayed there until the middle of 1939 when for safety reasons she was moved to a Carmelite monastery in Holland, which at that time was recognised as a neutral country. However, in May 1940 the Nazis invaded Holland, and so in 1942, together with another 243 baptised Jews she was taken prisoner and taken to Auschwitz where she was killed in a gas-chamber on August 9. Like her namesake, St. Teresa of Avila, she was a mystic, and following her canonization in 1998 was declared one of the Patron Saints of Europe.

The last Saint of the week was St. Clare of Assisi, daughter of a rich and highly respected family in Assisi. At the age of 18 she heard St. Francis speak about following Christ in his poverty, and asked Francis to help her achieve this. Much against the wishes of her father, who wanted her to marry, she was placed by St. Francis in the care of Benedictine nuns, who recognised her sincerity, and, as customary, shaved off her hair and dressed her in a plain robe and veil. Sometime later St. Francis had a small dwelling built for her and for others who had come to join her, and they began to live according to the Franciscan Rule. They became known as the Poor Clares, and continue until today as an enclosed religious Order for Women in the Catholic Church. St. Clare led her monastery for some 40 years, until her holy death at the age of 59 in 1253. It took Pope Alexander IV only 2 years to declare her a saint in 1255.

So there you have it, - each of them a fragrant offering to God, faithful to the words we heard Jesus speak in today's Gospel: "No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise him up on the last day." On this last day of Vocations Awareness week, what more reason do we need to pray to the Father for more vocations to the priesthood and the religious life?